About 1850, the remains of a carved wooden figure of Christ were discovered in the church of St Michael (later All Saints), Kemyes Inferior, about four km to the east of Caerleon. Before the Reformation, such figures were standard in many churches which dotted the landscape, of which it has been estimated some 8,000 existed in England during the thirteenth century, and about 950 in Wales. The Kemyes Christ is the most complete example of only a handful of medieval fragments to survive in Britain, and is thus of exceptional importance.

According to historical accounts, fragments of the Kemyes Inferior figure were found, ‘together with skulls and bones’, in ‘the blocked up roof-staircase’ during repairs and alterations to the church. The figure was subsequently presented by C. Holford Risley, son of the Reverend W.C. Risley, to the Museum of Antiquities, Caerleon, in about 1886. It was transferred in 1930 by the Monmouthshire and Caerleon Antiquarian Association to the National Museum of Wales, and today it is on permanent display in the Medieval Gallery at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff.

Although the figure has hitherto been attributed to the fourteenth century, arguments supporting this claim have never been set out in detail. Dating the figure relies on stylistic comparison with other sculptures, and as it possesses a certain naturalism, and lacks the rigidity of earlier Romanesque objects, it is now thought to derive from the late thirteenth century. Owing to the rarity of surviving figures in the British Isles from this period it is necessary to study continental objects, particularly those from Scandinavia, for further clues. For example, the late thirteenth-century crucifix figures in Skokloster and Ununge, both in Uppland (Sweden), share several similar characteristics, whereas the fourteenth-century Christ from Mochdre, Denbighshire, the only comparable wooden figure from Wales, is quite different. However, there is no reason to suggest continental manufacture for the Kemyes Christ, which was probably made in England or Wales.

Very little of the original pigment once covering the wooden figure can be seen today, and visitors to the Museum have probably only noticed its bare oak features. In 1989, however, during the cleaning of the figure for display, it became clear that a detailed analysis of the minute areas of surviving pigments on the figure would resolve a number of uncertainties regarding its original appearance. It had long been thought that the figure was repainted on several occasions, possibly reflecting the consequences of the Reformation and preceding period.
In 1999 investigative work commenced by focusing on the compositional analysis of pigments and gesso (a plaster-based layer). Visual examination initially identified primary and subsequent colour schemes, and differences between the torso and the arms, previously considered later additions. Several techniques were employed to identify the extent of preservation and pinpoint areas of interest for sampling. With the aid of Fumio Yokohama, a research student in the Department of Art, the figure was first X-rayed and then inspected under ultra-violet (UV) and infra-red (IR) light. Extensive microscopic examination followed next, in order to try and develop a paint-layer sequence. Subsequently, very small samples were taken and their cross-sections viewed under visible and UV light. Future analysis will involve compositional analysis of the pigments and gesso using scanning electron microscopes (SEM) with energy dispersive X-ray analysis (EDX).

In contrast to its present condition, the Kemeys Christ originally boasted a vivid and richly-coloured appearance, popular throughout the medieval period. Great care was evidently taken in decorating the figure, so that at one stage it would have glowing and gleaming with gold leaf. Examination of the figure has revealed considerable evidence of polychromy (use of many colours), and, like other examples of medieval sculpture, over-painting. The original pigment surface lines on a layer of gesso, except on the arms, where pigment has in places been applied directly to the wood. The original painted surface survives only over a small area, being principally reddish pink, to represent flesh tones, with traces of black on the hair-line and beard. Other features were picked out in a darker shade, namely the left eyebrow and possibly the right eye, and the loin-cloth, which retains evidence of a bright red pigment and, in places, gold. Although little pigment survives on the arms compared with the rest of the torso, the right arm does possess a second layer of pigment, which may be contemporary with the replacement of the left arm, either during the first half of the sixteenth century or even earlier.

At least three layers of painting have been detected, though the dating of each is problematic. The secondary colour scheme appears to have included gilding on the hair: gold, red and blue on the inside of the loin-cloth; dark brown and black details on the face; a green crown of thorns; and flesh tones in pale pink, with red emphasising the wounds. Stunning polychrome work like this would have been customary on such an important sculpture, and can also be found on religious works of art manufactured in other materials, such as ivory. The Kemeys figure clearly represents Christ on the cross, with a crown of thorns on his right side, is portrayed alive, with his eyes still open: Christ the Saviour; dying rather than dead. Depicted with the crown of thorns, the figure’s stance and expression suggest compassion, or at least resignation rather than distress.

The two most common places in a church for such crucifixes were either at the altar or at the function of chanell or nave, resting on a rood beam, which, together with the rood screen, often supported a rood loft, or a ledge above the channel arch (though other positions are known). As the Kemeys figure’s estimated original length of about 94 cm is
perhaps at the upper limit for an altar cross, a setting on or near the junction of nave and chancel may have been favoured. In such a location, and enhanced by its cross, it would have constituted an eye-catching focus in proportion with the modest size of the building.

As both screens and lofts were probably introduced into churches from the fourteenth century (earlier in some of the larger buildings), and rood-loft screens added in the following century, the crucifix may have been supported on a ledge or rood beam. Traces of at least three hundred rood screens have been recorded in Wales alone, most dating from the fifteenth century, and all medieval churches would have possessed a rood figure or painting. The rood, or figure of Christ on the cross, was an important focus of teaching and devotion in the medieval church, its purpose being to emphasise the concepts of Christ as saviour and his all-embracing supremacy, or Christ in agony. The image of the crucified Christ as the suffering Redeemer of mankind would have dominated the church interior, and some roods even provided inspiration for religious verse.

The Kemys Christ is a rare survival of pre-Reformation devotional figures once common in the British Isles. This powerful image of Christ’s suffering would have been widely seen and prayed to, and formed a purposeful part of everyday life. Current research on the figure and its implications will, it is hoped, contribute to a better understanding of spirituality and Gothic religious art in medieval Wales.